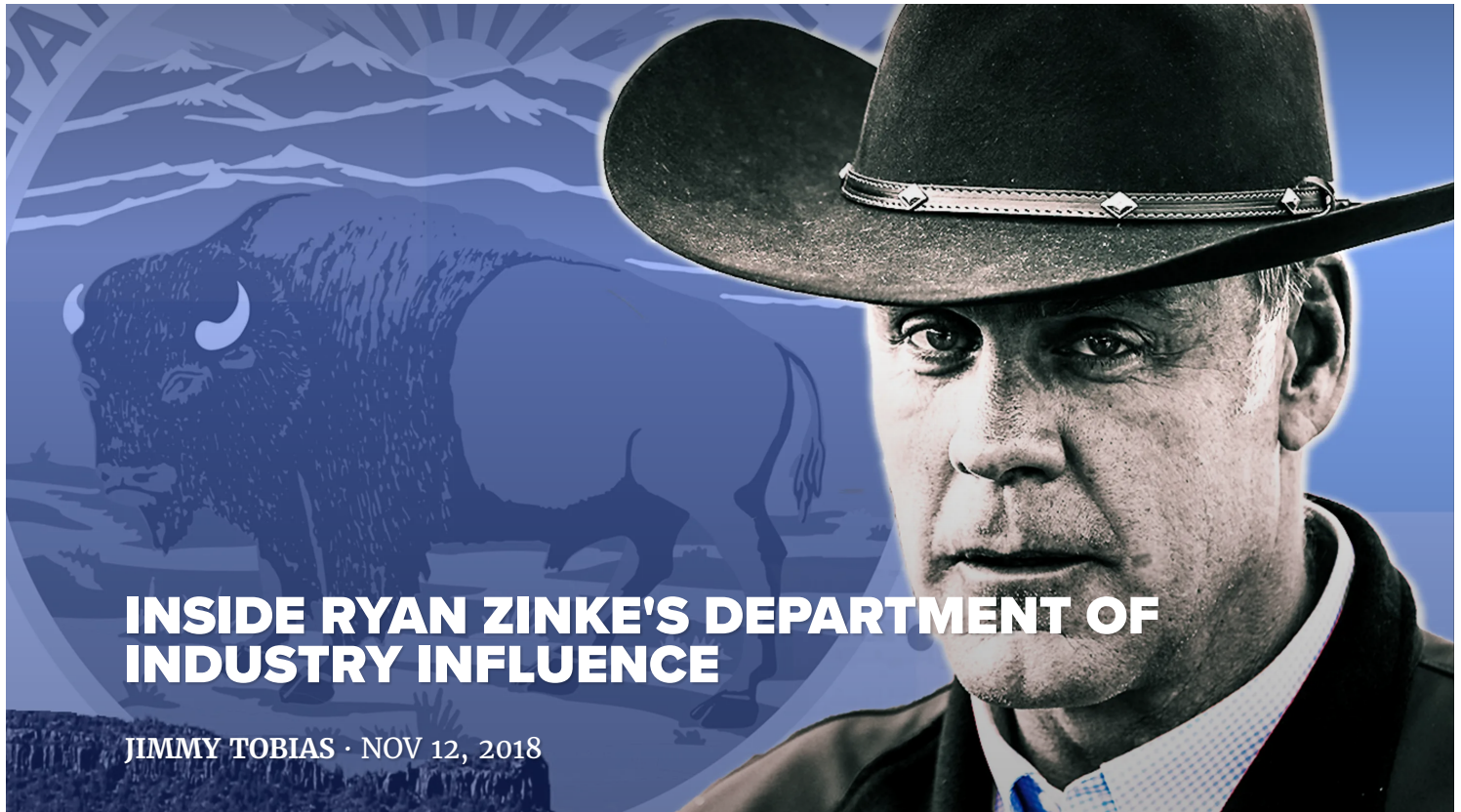


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"They are undermining the department's mission at every turn": New documents reveal just how much the Department of the Interior favored industry over conservation.

This story was produced in collaboration with the [Guardian](#).

Since his first day on the job, when he surrounded himself with a National Park Service police escort and rode through Washington, D.C., on a white-nosed horse named Tonto, Secretary of the Interior [Ryan Zinke](#) has exhibited a flair for ostentation.

Not long after taking office in March of 2017, the new secretary started flying a special flag, adorned with the agency's bison seal, above the Department of the Interior's elegant New Deal-era headquarters. At a cost of more than \$2,000, he also commissioned commemorative coins emblazoned with his name to hand out to visitors and staff. He replaced the doors in his office to the tune of more than \$130,000, and installed a hunting-themed arcade game in the department's cafeteria.

Yet to some longtime civil servants working at Interior headquarters, this flashy behavior was merely a distraction from graver concerns.

"There was a lot of eye-rolling and embarrassment about the flag and the horse and all of the ridiculousness," says a former senior employee who left last year and requested anonymity for fear of retaliation. For some, the dominant emotional tenor at the time was "fear and anxiety" as Zinke and his team ushered in "dramatic change" at the Department of the Interior (DOI).

"All the new administration was interested in was their checklist for dismantling regulations and weakening environmental and land use protections," says the former staffer. "Instead of asking why a senator or lobbyist or CEO was asking for a special favor and whether or not it was allowed under the law, this administration wanted to know why the special favor wasn't already done and which deep state employee was standing in the way."

Despite his public persona as a folksy Montanan with a Boy Scout's penchant for pennants and horses, Zinke has taken shrewd and aggressive steps to transform from the inside a department whose 70,000 employees manage the country's treasured national parks and its endangered species, in addition to overseeing vast energy and mineral deposits on at least 500 million acres of public land.

During Zinke's first months in office, he reassigned at least 25 senior officials at the department, a move that led some of the affected staff to question whether they were being punished for past work on subjects such as climate change, and which prompted at least one high-profile resignation. He publicly questioned the allegiance of other of his newly inherited employees, saying he had "30 percent of the crew that's not loyal to the flag."

Most importantly, Zinke rapidly installed a slew of conservative operatives and industry sympathizers in key positions throughout the agency. Because these senior advisers, counselors, and other appointees are rarely subject to Senate approval, few people know their names. They nevertheless wield immense power and are responsible for much of the day-to-day work at the Department of the Interior.

Hundreds of pages of correspondence and calendars reviewed by the *Guardian* and Pacific Standard show how Zinke and his top aides have favored corporate and conservative calls to prioritize resource extraction at the expense of conservation, while consistently delivering on industry desires—despite sometimes running afoul of conflict of interest rules.

The Department of the Interior responded to only one of multiple inquiries made to it, saying through a spokesperson that "the Department has addressed these questions to you and other reporters on multiple occasions. Our position remains unchanged."

Zinke is now facing a swirl of misconduct allegations, and President Donald Trump has said he would make a decision on his future at the department as soon as this week. But whatever Zinke's fate, he has stocked the department with a slate of committed conservative appointees who will continue to remake the agency in the image of the Trump administration.

"They are undermining the department's mission at every turn," says one current high-level civil servant, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation. "I have been here a pretty long time and seen different administrations from both sides of the aisle," the civil servant adds, "but this is the worst I have ever seen."

'AN AMERICA FIRST ENERGY PLAN'

During his presidential campaign, Trump made no secret of his ambition to exploit the American landscape. "A Trump administration will develop an America first energy plan," he said in a 2016 speech before the North Dakota Petroleum Council. "American energy dominance will be declared a strategic, economic, and foreign policy goal of the United States."

The U.S. controls enormous publicly owned energy resources, from the underwater oil wells of the Gulf of Mexico to the gas fields of North Dakota and the uranium deposits of Arizona. The DOI is the agency that decides who can drill and mine these riches.

Zinke has styled himself, at least superficially, after Theodore Roosevelt, the progressive-era president who helped create America's modern conservation system. But Zinke has veered sharply from Roosevelt's legacy.

Where Roosevelt created the nation's first national monuments, Zinke drastically reduced the size of Bears Ears National Monument and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in Utah last year in what amounted to the largest rollback of protected public lands in American history.

More broadly, over the last fiscal year, the department has sought to lease a stunning 12.8 million acres of publicly owned oil and gas parcels to private companies.

And while Roosevelt railed against powerful special interests, Zinke has a cozy relationship with industry groups. The monument reductions occurred after Zinke was pressured by conservative groups such as the Koch-affiliated Americans for Prosperity and energy companies such as the uranium firm Energy Fuels Inc. In fact, during Zinke's first 18 months in office he met repeatedly with oil and gas industry organizations that have collectively given him more than \$110,000 in political contributions over the course of his career, according to a report from the Western Values Project.

Zinke's top deputies also have a close relationship with extractive industries. During their first year and a half on the job, just seven of Zinke's high-level political appointees collectively participated in at least 280 meetings, calls, or gatherings with fossil fuel corporations, mining companies, or related advocacy groups, according to calendars obtained via public records requests and analyzed by the *Guardian* and Pacific Standard. Meetings with conservative ideological organizations, agricultural and timber groups, and corporate lobbying and law firms also appeared regularly on the officials' calendars.

These extractive interests had more than twice as much access as conservation non-governmental organizations, which obtained at least 115 meetings and calls with the seven officials within the same timeframe.

At a private energy summit that took place in Washington, D.C., last December, a Zinke appointee named Timothy Williams articulated the department's pro-industry agenda, according to documentation of his remarks reported here for the first time.

Williams dismissively characterized the approach taken by the administration of Barack Obama: "Anything you want to do on public land, they want to see what the carbon footprint is and what the social cost is." Under Zinke, "we're not looking at this," he said. The new administration is instead focused on "economic impacts." It is bent on changing "the mindset of the bureaucrats."

From the very beginning, however, Interior appointees appear to have violated Trump's own ethics directives intended to "drain the swamp."

According to rules put in place by the Trump administration, officials are supposed to be prohibited for a period of two years from the date of their appointment from having meetings with former employers, with few exceptions, and DOI guidelines recommend that officials take steps to avoid even the appearance of a conflict of interest, unless they receive a waiver.

Williams, for instance, previously worked for Americans for Prosperity (AFP), a Koch brothers-funded organization committed to combating government regulations of all kinds, including environmental protections. Soon after joining the department as the deputy director of the office of intergovernmental and external affairs, his office reached out to AFP to hold a meeting, according to records obtained by the investigative group Documented. "Happy to meet to discuss partnering on shared priorities," Chrissy Harbin, then the AFP vice president, replied in an email.

In another case, the political appointee Douglas Domenech met twice in April of 2017 with representatives of his former employer, the Texas Public Policy Foundation, another Koch-linked conservative foundation. According to his work calendar, the subject of the meeting was a pair of active lawsuits the organization had filed against agencies within the DOI concerning endangered species and property rights—the meetings appear to be a glaring conflict of interest. Little more than six months after its meetings with Domenech, TPPF had what it described as a "major win" when it settled one of those lawsuits.

There are "express prohibitions" on such meetings in the White House's own ethics pledge, says Virginia Canter, the chief ethics counsel at the non-partisan Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics. "These high-level officials are supposed to be setting the tone for the entire department and this shows a complete disregard for the ethics rules put in place by the administration."

GUTTING METHANE REGULATIONS

The *Guardian* and Pacific Standard have uncovered several instances in which DOI leadership has coordinated closely with industry-aligned groups on crucial legal and regulatory decisions, with profound consequences for efforts to combat climate change, wildlife management, and other matters.

Zinke's department plays a major role in the regulation of methane, which, for the first 20 years after it is introduced into the atmosphere, is over 80 times more effective at trapping heat than carbon dioxide. The DOI under Obama moved to clamp down on a principal source of domestic methane pollution—the wasteful leaking, venting, and flaring of methane by oil and gas companies. In late 2016, just before Obama left office, the DOI finalized a new federal regulation that required oil and gas drillers operating on public land to take stringent steps to detect and capture methane waste.

Influential oil and gas industry trade groups like the Independent Petroleum Association of America were opposed to the measure, and sued in late 2016 to block what it considered a "regulatory onslaught on American producers." During the first months of the Trump administration, Republicans led an industry-backed effort to repeal the methane rule using the Congressional Review Act, a law that enables Congress and the president to roll back recently issued regulations.

The repeal effort soon ran into trouble, however, when Senate Democrats and a handful of Republicans, including Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, publicly came out against it in the spring of 2017. Emails reveal how the DOI and the oil industry coordinated a response.

"Really?" wrote Interior official Micah Chambers, in a frustrated note to Ryan Ullman, the IPAA's director of government relations, in March of 2017, upon learning of Graham's opposition.

"I'm disappointed to put it very politely," Ullman responded. Ullman asked whether the department would wheel out Zinke to make the case for getting rid of the regulation.

Graham did not change his mind about the methane rule and the Senate ultimately voted against repealing the regulation. Zinke's department soon took matters into its own hands. The department tried twice in 2017 to block methane regulation by itself, but both times it was stymied by legal challenges from environmentalist groups and state governments.

A political appointee named Katharine MacGregor helped lead the department's handling of the issue. Her calendar shows several meetings with fossil fuel industry groups in the summer and fall of 2017, including one about methane just a few hours before an internal DOI meeting on the same subject.

In September of this year, MacGregor announced that the department had decided to rewrite the rule entirely, rather than merely block it. The revision effectively rolled back the methane rule.

Chase Huntley, the energy and climate program director at The Wilderness Society, says his organization held several meetings with top Interior officials, and it became apparent to him that their minds were already made up, and that the gutting of the methane rule was a preordained outcome.

"It seems clear that the methane rule rollback, while arbitrary, was a foregone conclusion from day one of this administration," he says. It was rooted "in a philosophical and policy allegiance to the industry's best interests."

THE MINING INDUSTRY VS. THE SAGE GROUSE

Extractive industries also seem to have had a hand in the department's implementation of the Endangered Species Act, which is regarded as one of the strongest environmental laws in the world but is the bane of industry groups because it limits development in sensitive habitat.

The DOI energy counselor, Vincent DeVito, for instance, appears to have helped delay Endangered Species Act protections last year for an imperiled fresh water mussel species in Texas at the behest of oil and gas interests. In mid-2017, the government relations director for the Independent Petroleum Association of America wrote in an email to DeVito: "We really hope that you can intervene before this species gets listed next month."

When the species' listing was delayed, the Guardian and Pacific Standard have learned from records, the IPAA sent DeVito an email with the words: "THANK YOU!" DeVito has since left the department to work for an oil and gas company.

The department has taken a controversial stance, too, on the greater sage grouse, a chicken-size bird that dwells among the sprawling sagebrush plains of the American West. Even the slightest disturbance can drive the animal from its breeding and nesting ground, and populations have plummeted in recent decades as oil and gas drilling, mining, and other development has fractured its habitat.

In 2015, the Obama administration unveiled protection plans for the species, including a proposal to prohibit new mining on 10 million acres of federal land in the hope of avoiding disturbance. But after Trump's election, the mining industry suddenly found itself with committed sympathizers within the Interior.

A striking email chain reviewed by the *Guardian* and Pacific Standard reveals that a mining industry advocate helped edit the wording of legislative language intended to block funding for these sage grouse conservation efforts.

In one message from spring of 2017, a Republican staffer with the Congressional Western Caucus named Jeff Small described producing the proposed text "after much discussion" with Laura Skaer, the executive director of the influential American Exploration and Mining Association. He sent an email to top officials at the DOI to run the legislative language past them too.

Kathleen Benedetto, a senior adviser at the department, replied: "It will need to be modified." That very day, a modified version of the language was suggested to a House committee by Republican congressman Paul Gosar. (A spokesperson for Gosar says that "it is common for us to solicit feedback from outside experts and impacted stakeholders.")

The Republican-led Congress ultimately failed to block funding for the proposed mining prohibition, however, and Zinke's department once again took matters into its own hands. In June of 2017, Zinke established a broad internal review of the Obama-era sage grouse conservation plans, naming Benedetto, previously the co-founder of the Women's Mining Coalition, as "co-lead" of the effort.

Over the course of the next four months, Benedetto's calendar shows she had at least 16 meetings or calls with mining groups. In October of 2017, the Bureau of Land Management, which Benedetto helps oversee, announced that the 10 million acres would no longer be out of bounds for mining.

The AEMA celebrated the victory, saying the DOI "has done the right thing by ending this epic federal land grab."

THE FUTURE FOR ZINKE

Since taking office, Zinke and his department have been subject to no fewer than 15 federal investigations. The DOI's Office of Inspector General is probing his involvement in a Montana land deal with the chairman of the oil services company Halliburton. It is also looking into his role in blocking the development of a proposed casino involving two Native American tribes in Connecticut. In late October, the *Washington Post* reported that the the inspector general's office referred one of its inquiries to the Department of Justice for further investigation, though it did not specify which one.

The secretary's pro-fossil fuel agenda, his team's conflict of interests problems, and his own personal conduct are likely to draw intense scrutiny from Democrats once they take control of the House in January of 2019. Already, Congressman Raul Grijalva of Arizona, who will likely take the reins as the chair of the House Natural Resources Committee next year, has vowed to call Zinke before the committee in order to interrogate him about his "failures and scandals." Whether Zinke sticks around at the department is an open question, though many press reports indicate that he is preparing to step down from office.

His political appointees, nevertheless, will likely remain. But they too acknowledge that they have a short timeframe in which to finish their work of fulfilling Trump's energy dominance agenda.

At the private Washington, D.C., energy summit back in December, Tim Williams admitted as much to his audience of conservative operatives and fossil fuel advocates.

"Obviously we are not going as fast as everybody wants, but at some point there will be an administration in here, an administration that is not friendly to your values, to you guys," he said.

"So bear with us," he added later. "You guys should know that if you have any questions or any problems you feel free to contact me. That is my job. To work with industry."

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